

WDNR Ruffed Grouse Management Plan Team
Meeting Minutes
September 19, 2019
9 AM – 3 PM
Wisconsin Rapids DNR Service Center
473 Griffith Ave.
Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494

Attendance

- Mark Witecha, DNR-WM
- Alaina Gerrits, DNR-WM
- Brandon Stefanski, DNR-WM
- Janet Brehm, DNR-WM
- Brad Hutnik, DNR-FR
- Ann Dassow, USFS-CNNF
- Kevyn Quamme, WWF
- Chris Pollentier, DNR-OAS
- Gary Zimmer, WCFA
- John Kubisiak, WGF
- Jon Steigerwaldt, RGS

Update on timeline for ruffed grouse plan

- All final revisions need to be incorporated into the plan by 9/24/2019
- Final draft will be sent to team members and WLT concurrently for final review from 9/24-10/2
- On 10/2 final draft will be sent out for formatting and final design
- Plan will be attached to green sheet for NRB by 11/11 to be included in the December board meeting agenda
- The team would like to submit the plan at the December meeting so that there is time to implement the permanent rule suggested in the plan to go into effect before the 2020 hunting season

Discussion and review of public comments

- Two of the most common themes we received comments on included suggestions to lower the daily bag limit and the plan's suggestion to shorten the season in Zone A to end on the Sunday nearest January 6th. We received 26 comments in opposition to the early closure and 10 comments supporting the early closure. In response to **the team's rationale for shortening the season (taken from Appendix A of the grouse plan)**: When managing wildlife, biologists must consider not only biological data from scientific research, but also social desires derived from public comments and surveys. Results from our ruffed grouse hunter survey indicated a strong desire for a more conservative season framework.

- A suite of alternate season frameworks was presented to survey respondents that included: an early season closure, a later season opener, reduced bag limits and altered shooting hours. Results of the survey showed overwhelming support for an early closure (67%). The survey also showed majority support (58%) for a season opener concurrent with woodcock hunting (typically one week later than the current season opener). Seventy-three percent of respondents indicated support for a lowered bag limit from 5 to 3 birds per day. Finally, a vast majority of respondents were supportive of maintaining current shooting hours (72%).
- When consulting the literature there are few studies that indicate mortality from hunter harvest of grouse is additive, meaning it has potential to decrease the population in the future. Many studies have found that hunter harvest, especially early in the season is compensatory and likely does not impact future grouse populations. However, there are several studies that show the later in the season that harvest occurs, the more likely harvest is to be additive (Small et al. 1991). Drawing from other data in the hunter survey that states hunters rarely fill their daily bag and general opposition to altered shooting hours, the management plan team feels that the best balance of social and biological drivers is an earlier season closure. The team acknowledges that this management technique likely will not have dramatic, immediate, impacts on the population of grouse in Wisconsin but instead is an answer to social desires for a restricted season and is likely a biologically conservative measure that may become more relevant should certain environmental and climactic conditions occur in the future. The team would like to reiterate that measures to improve habitat statewide will be the most effective means to increase grouse populations.
- In response to a comment about DNR providing **aspen seedlings to private landowners**: the department supports and provides several programs already to help create and maintain young forest habitat on private lands such as the Young Forest Partnership and partner positions with RGS (forest specialists)
- In response to comments suggesting DNR should **provide bounties for trapping/harvesting predators**: First, DNR cannot offer bounties for wolves because they are federally protected. Second, grouse have evolved and coexisted with predators for centuries and research has shown predator control has little to no impact on increasing grouse numbers, our best bet is to improve habitat
- In response to comments **suggesting turkeys are predating on or competing with grouse** causing the population to decline: research has explicitly shown that because of their differing preferences for food and habitat grouse and turkeys do not compete with one another. The increase in older aged forest stands has likely helped increase turkey numbers while disappearing young forests have led to the decline of grouse numbers concurrently. Jodie Provost out of MN has written a very informative article “Wild turkey and ruffed grouse- the mistaken blame game” thoroughly dissecting this topic.
- Details will be added in the plan that will use breeding bird atlas data to show other old growth forest species are increasing while other young forest specialists are declining to **prove further that the turkey/grouse relationship is correlation** and not causation.

This information will also provide information on how **other young forest species will be benefitted** by the implementation of the plan.

- A one-page document will also be created on the DNR web page with more information on the **relationship of grouse and turkeys**
- Addressing comments **related to references and citations**: there was copy and paste error that accidentally omitted several citations that were suggested by commenters, especially related to research conducted in WI. These references will be added in the final draft of the plan
- In response to comments related to **increased ATV/UTV** use and how it potentially may make hunters “too” efficient or less ethical with temptation to shoot from roadways or as a potential disturbance to grouse with increased noise and traffic: this does raise an interesting research question but the team felt it is generally outside the bounds of the scope of this management plan and likely is more an issue of hunter experience and not biological concern with traffic being mostly constricted to trails leaving refuge areas away from roadways. Public land managers are tasked with serving multiple user groups and ATV/UTV user groups have increased dramatically in recent years, many state-owned lands have trails designated for recreational vehicles and those for foot traffic only, the team recommends avoiding ATV/UTV trails for hunting if you feel ATV/UTV use disrupts your hunting activities. Also, it is important to reiterate that it is illegal to shoot within 50 feet from the roadway’s center on public roadways (public roadways include roads shown on current official county highway maps available from the Department of Transportation) and law enforcement should be contacted if you witness these activities while afield.
- In response to comments questioning **the need for data on the economic impact of grouse hunters**: this data could be very important for presenting the importance of grouse hunters, a group that unfortunately has been decreasing in recent years. It could also help provide information for R3 activities.
- In response to several commenters who desired **more quantifiable habitat goals**, especially within the habitat objectives of the plan: the team has decided to revise the language within the focal area section of the plan emphasizing that acreage goals related to aspen regeneration, age class dispersion, drumming logs retained after harvest, stand size and other habitat treatments, will be included in the landscape specific BMPs (best management practices) that will be created within two years of the adoption of the plan.
- Several commenters expressed the desire for **quantifiable population goals**; the team feels that it is unrealistic to set population goals for a 10-year management plan that has a population cycle of approximately the same length, this would require maximum and minimum population levels and with no real estimate of past population levels creating a population benchmark would likely be quite inaccurate and hard to measure. The team feels our best index of the grouse population is derived from the drumming surveys we have used for decades to estimate the level of breeding grouse in the population. Results from drumming surveys will provide us a tool to measure the relative success of our management plan.

- Several comments expressed that **hunter surveys should be conducted on a regular basis**; the team agrees with this recommendation and will add language to the plan indicating that, pending available resources, the team suggests the hunter survey be conducted every other year to continuously gather information on not only hunter satisfaction but also field observations. Our plan also suggests the creation of some type of mobile application that will allow hunters to log their grouse observations while afield.
- In response to commenters desiring a **ruffed grouse habitat stamp**: the DNR cannot lobby for new legislature and external partner groups would have to push this issue, hunters who are interested in this avenue should seek out information from external partner groups such as RGS, WWF and others.
- After receiving several comments on **the potential impact deer have on the shrub layer of forests through browsing, especially in areas of high deer density**; the team felt these suggestions were interesting and important and required the addition of another research objective to the management plan, the plan was revised to add this research objective.
- Regarding comments on the **need for more thorough public review** the team would like to note that a public comment period was provided, along with a series of public informational meetings. Also, the plan will be available for another public comment period before it is presented at the December Natural Resources Board meeting, all information for submitting public comment or testimony can be found on the DNR website under keywords “NRB”.
- Several commenters desired a way to **restrict non-resident hunter participation**, overall historical small game hunter surveys have found non-resident grouse hunters make up a minority of the population of grouse hunters. Non-resident hunters are economically important locally and the team does not feel they should be restricted as expanding hunter opportunities ranges beyond the confines of our own state.
- Several commenters expressed the need **for national forests, MFL land and large industrial forests open to hunting to be included in the FFLIGHT tool**. The team agrees with this suggestion and will work to complete this task, there may be some restrictions with industrial forests and MFL lands as ownership changes frequently, but the boundaries should at least be able to be included within FFLIGHT.
- **Fort McCoy submitted comments stating the suggested boundary would cut Fort McCoy into two different harvest management zones**. To solve this issue the team decided to realign the zones to follow highway 21 to Interstate 94 to I-90 to encompass almost the entirety of Fort McCoy within Zone A. Using the interstate also provides a clear border that will be more easily enforced.
- In response to commenters who desired to see the results of the ruffed grouse hunter survey the team has decided to **add the results of the ruffed grouse hunter survey as an appendix to the plan**.
- In response to comments questioning the lack of reference to **the ecological landscapes of WI**, the plan will be revised to add language indicating that ecological landscapes will be considered and used as a template for constructing the BMPs within focal areas.

- In response to questions about **the impact of West Nile virus on grouse**, language in the plan will be revised to avoid “downplaying” the potential significance of the disease and emphasize that all three years of data need to be collected and analyzing before jumping to conclusions as the virus’s impacts can vary greatly from year to year depending on environmental factors.
- One comment arose regarding **the impact invasive species may have on grouse**; the team felt this was a very important topic and revised language to include several sentences explaining the potential impacts of invasive species within the plan.
- One commenter felt that **timber investment management organizations (TIMOs)** should be one of the partners included in the implementation of the plan, the team agreed with this suggestion and is currently researching contacts to include, especially once the habitat implementation phase of the plan is underway.
- The team also decided to clarify language to include the **ability to adjust future management suggestions based on emerging research**. The plan wanted to make clear that emerging research or environmental factors may slightly alter management prescriptions in the next 10 years.